Gift Selection for Easy and Difficult Recipients: A Social Roles Interpretation

CELE OTNES
TINA M. LOWREY
YOUNG CHAN KIM*

Using interpretive techniques, we explore the meaning underlying Christmas shoppers’ description of some recipients as “easy” or “difficult,” in terms of gift selection. We argue that recipients are described as such because they either help or hinder givers’ attempts to express specific social roles through exchange. We identify six such roles that givers express alone or in combination to each recipient on their gift lists. These are the pleaser, the provider, the compensator, the socializer, the acknowledger, and the avoider. We discuss the implications of our findings and suggest areas worthy of further research.

Since Sherry (1983) provided a framework that elucidated the stages of the gift-exchange process, researchers have examined the influence of myriad variables within these stages. However, most gift-exchange research conducted both before and after the appearance of Sherry’s model could be described as “giver-centric.” For example, research has focused on how different motivations of the giver can influence gift exchange (see Belk 1976; Clarke and Belk 1979; Goodwin, Smith, and Spiggle 1990; Heeler et al. 1979), how givers’ demographic and psychographic characteristics can influence exchange (see Caplow 1982, 1984; Cheal 1988; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Sherry and McGrath 1989), and how aspects of the gift-exchange situation influence givers’ behavior (Belk and Coon 1991; Coon and Belk 1991; Mattson 1982).

This emphasis on giver-centered variables has tended to underplay the role of the recipient in the gift-exchange process. Yet some studies suggest that givers’ selection strategies vary, depending on the recipient for whom the gift is intended (Belk 1982; Caplow 1982; Cheal 1988). One way to integrate the study of recipient influences within a study of gift-selection behavior is to explore how givers themselves actually view recipients and then examine how these perceptions influence actual gift-selection practices.

We began our study of gift selection during the Christmas season with the general question, What types of strategies do consumers use when selecting gifts for recipients? We became interested in this topic because there is little empirical research that explores the gift-selection strategies used by consumers. Early in the project, it became apparent that our informants did not view each recipient on their Christmas list in the same manner. Rather, they spontaneously described almost half of their recipients as “difficult” or “easy” in terms of gift selection. The discovery of this tendency led us to address the following questions: Why are some recipients perceived as difficult or easy? What types of recipients tended to be characterized in these manners? Given our original interest in gift-selection strategies, we also wondered whether and how givers modified their selection behavior depending on the type of recipient for whom a gift was selected.

Our analysis indicates that, almost without exception, the perception of recipients as easy or difficult stemmed from some aspect of the particular relationship between giver and recipient. Specifically, it appears that givers express one or more social roles to recipients through gift exchange. Thus, we will illustrate how givers’ choices of which social role(s) to express influence both their description of recipients as either easy or difficult and their use of specific gift-selection strategies.
METHOD

We chose to examine gift-selection strategies during the Christmas season because Christmas has been described as the most complex gift-exchange occasion in America (Cheal 1988; Otnes and Woodruff 1991). We recruited informants for our study by placing ads in a university paper and a local paper of a midwestern city (population 100,000) during the first week of November, 1990. Students were requested not to answer the ads. The ads explained that we wished to conduct two in-depth interviews with each informant, accompany them on two Christmas shopping trips, and hold a brief follow-up interview in January. We offered a $30 incentive for participation.

Eighteen volunteers answered the ads. Three were eliminated because they had completed most of their Christmas shopping or because they would not be available for all stages of the research. Each researcher was then assigned five informants for the duration of the study.

Fourteen of the 15 informants were women. The literature indicates that women are more involved in gift exchange in general (Cheal 1988; Steinkamp and Wallendorf 1991) and Christmas shopping in particular (Caplow 1982; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Sherry and McGrath 1989). Thus, while we were disappointed by the lack of response from men, we were hardly surprised by it. Appendix A contains a detailed description of our informants’ demographic characteristics.

We employed both interviews and shopping trips because we believed that the resulting text would allow us to create a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of our informants’ gift-selection experiences. All informant interactions (except the follow-up interview) occurred over the six-week period immediately preceding Christmas week, 1990. Informant encounters were spaced approximately one week apart.

Following McCracken’s (1988) advice, we created a list of questions and carefully scheduled prompts for the first interview. Moreover, we pursued any related topics of interest introduced by our informants. As we became familiar with our informants’ shopping tasks, we each created specific questions for the second interview related to these tasks. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes.

Sherry’s observation that naturalistic settings such as shopping expeditions are essential to yield “native” perceptions relevant to gift exchange (Sherry 1983, p. 157) served as motivation for including such trips in our research design. Each trip lasted between one and two hours. To keep informant interaction as natural as possible, we did not videotape or audiotape these shopping trips. However, we did take some notes in the field and used these to prepare more detailed field notes immediately after each trip.

Informants chose the sites for all shopping trips. These included discount stores, department stores, drugstores, hardware stores, and specialty shops (e.g., antique stores and boutiques). Some trips took place in only one store, some involved driving from one retail location to another, and some took place in a mall setting. The time spent traveling with informants proved especially valuable, as they often volunteered information about their shopping experiences.

Many researchers (see Bogdan and Taylor 1984; Denzin 1983; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989) suggest ways to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative data. Appendix B summarizes the ways in which we incorporated several of these suggestions into our research design.

Almost 400 pages of text, consisting of interview transcripts and field notes, were generated. Our final interpretation was created by negotiating agreement among our individual interpretations of our informants’ experiences. And, while the text included descriptions of numerous gift-selection experiences, we obviously could not observe all facets of our informants’ gift-selection activity. Furthermore, Atkinson (1992, p. 9) points out that the “field” described through qualitative research is “the outcome of what the ethnographer may encompass in his or her gaze; what he or she may negotiate with hosts and informants; and what [he or she] omits and overlooks as much as what [is] observe[d].” Nevertheless, we have combined our interpretive interpersonal construction of what we believe the text to mean with a “reconstruction of the meanings of the original authors of the text” (Hirschman 1989, p. 209).

THE MEANING OF “DIFFICULT” AND “EASY” RECIPIENTS

Of the 207 potential gift recipients who were named by our informants, 49 were spontaneously described as difficult and 36 as easy, in terms of gift selection (Table 1). There are some obvious differences between these groups of recipients. For example, difficult recipients tended to be older or more distant relatives. Likewise, the list of easy recipients is dominated by children and same-gender friends.

Our explanation of why these informants were regarded as easy or difficult will proceed as follows. First, we employ metaphorical analysis to provide an overall framework for our interpretation. Second, we offer the categories of social roles that emerged from our data, exploring the cultural logic and the characteristics that define each role. We also discuss the gift-selection strategies used by our informants as they attempted to express these social roles to recipients.

In discussing the creation of interpretive ethnography, Atkinson (1992) notes that “a successful metaphor can encapsulate a vast array of instances, types and categories. The analytic metaphor can thus be sort of a
crystallization or condensation of sociological or anthropological understanding” (p. 12).

We begin our interpretation with a metaphor that likens our Christmas gift givers to chameleons. Specifically, we observed that, as informants approached the gift-selection task for individual recipients, they typically expressed different social roles—or combinations of roles—to different recipients.

Among sociologists, there is about as much agreement over the meaning of the term “role” as there is among consumer researchers who discuss the term “involvement.” Our intention is to define the term “social role” in the manner in which it was described by George Herbert Mead (1934). That is, roles are sets of behaviors created solely in response to interaction with others. As such, roles are “those expectations mobilized by an identity through verbal and nonverbal communication in a specific social situation” (Stone and Faberma 1970, p. 208).

The chameleon metaphor aptly captures our informants’ approach to the expression of social roles, because the pervasive nature of Christmas gift exchange in American culture means that most of our informants typically were selecting gifts for (and thus expressing social roles to) everyone who was a member of their social networks. This situation becomes even more complex because “as an individual accumulates [social] roles, the gift may be used to indicate the relative importance of these roles” (Sherry 1983, p. 158). Thus, our informants’ task was formidable: accurately assess the nature of their relationship with each recipient and adapt their gift-selection behavior so as to select a gift that reflects the role(s) they wish to express in each relationship.

Such adaptability is especially remarkable, given that our informants selected gifts for an average of 15 recipients and some shopped for as many as 30. Moreover, the nature of our informants’ relationships with recipients varied from casual acquaintance to extreme intimacy, and the valences attached to these relationships ranged from very negative to very positive. Thus, it is no wonder that Green and Alden (1988) reported that consumers often described Christmas shopping as “particularly anxiety-producing and exhausting” (p. 163).

The metaphor of Christmas gift givers as chameleons also illuminates why our informants often described recipients as difficult or easy. For instance, it appeared that the main reason certain recipients were deemed easy was that they offered little resistance as givers attempted to express a specific social role. Furthermore, an easy recipient was one who had, in the past, correctly interpreted the message that a giver, in the guise of a specific role(s), wished to convey. In contrast, our interpretation of difficult recipients is that, consciously or unconsciously, they thwart a giver’s attempt to express a particular role through gift exchange. As a result, givers typically perceive difficult recipients as misinterpreting gifts designed to express specific social roles.

While it is no doubt true that gifts reflect the importance that the giver attaches to expressing a particular social role (Sherry 1983), our research indicates that different gift-selection strategies may reflect the importance of these roles as well. Thus, the chameleon metaphor also describes the way in which our informants moved fluidly from one gift-selection strategy to another as they sought gifts that were appropriate conduits of each role they were trying to express.

The remainder of our interpretation will focus on the emergence of six social roles expressed to recipients through gift exchange. These are the pleaser, the provider, the compensator, the socializer, the acknowledger, and the avoider. We will interpret what we believe to be the underlying messages that our informants conveyed when expressing each role and provide evidence that recipients were often labeled “easy” or “difficult” because informants perceived that recipients either helped or hindered givers’ attempts to express a specific role(s) through gift exchange. Furthermore, we will provide an interpretive

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficult recipients:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-laws</td>
<td>10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents and elderly relatives</td>
<td>7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steprelatives</td>
<td>6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (opposite gender)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (same gender)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other affinal relatives (niece, cousin)</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Easy recipients:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (same gender)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband or boyfriend</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (opposite gender)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Affinal relatives.
description of the selection strategies used by givers as they attempted to express these different roles.

THE PLEASER

By far the most prevalent role articulated by our informants was that of the pleaser. Givers expressed this role to a wide range of recipients, including children, parents, spouses or significant others, and friends. Givers' descriptions made it clear that they expressed the role of pleaser only to recipients who were regarded as very special. Thus, the objective for pleasers was to select a gift they believed the recipient would like, based upon perceptions of the recipient's tastes and interests. Because of this, we interpret the message conveyed through this type of gift exchange to be purely symbolic or communicative (Belk 1979)—for example, "I value you enough to get you something that I think you would enjoy." Thus, the giver's purpose in expressing this role was purely to strengthen social ties or, at the very least, to maintain goodwill between giver and recipient.

Our informants gave many reasons why it was easy to express the role of pleaser to certain recipients. For example, mothers—or informants acting as pseudomothers—often noted that young children "liked everything." We interpret this statement to mean that these children had liked everything givers had presented to them in the past. Thus, the giver's history of transactions with the child was replete with successful exchanges where the role of pleaser had been successfully communicated.

We also noted that the younger, never-married informants in our sample frequently explained the ease of selecting gifts for recipients in terms of how similar recipients' tastes were to their own. Our interpretation of this finding is that, because these givers' social networks tended to be relatively small or homogenous, they did not yet recognize the power of gifts to act as agents of social cohesion across a wide range of distant and close relationships (Cheal 1988). Put another way, younger givers may not yet have experienced selecting gifts for a wide variety of recipients, and thus have not yet learned (by necessity) to become chameleon-like in their gift-exchange behavior. As a result, these pleasers may simply be naively pleasing themselves through gift selection, and if their gifts do please recipients, this fact is almost accidental. Thus, while these young givers may truly wish to express the role of pleaser, they still attempt to fulfill this task by selecting gifts that reflect their own self-concept, rather than the recipient's (Belk 1979).

Kate's experience typifies this finding. Because she and her sister had similar tastes, she said, "I know her best and I know what she'll like. . . . I love to get her a big present, something she really wants." But while shopping for her boyfriend, someone whom she had known all her life but whose tastes were nevertheless radically different from her own, Kate couldn't believe her boyfriend wanted a wrench set, and what's more, that he would want her to buy it for him. She didn't know anything about them, couldn't he just buy them himself and let her get something else? [Field notes]

In contrast, pleasers who had come to recognize the power of the gift to enhance social bonds had learned to adapt and transform their gift-selection behavior to select something that truly pleased the recipient, even if it meant violating their own tastes. As Betsy noted when shopping for her sister, "Sometimes it's hard because . . . we're totally opposite, you know, and I end up buying things that I'm not particularly fond of. And she'll buy me things she really hates, because I like Precious Moments [a brand of collectible figurine] and she doesn't. So she ends up buying me Precious Moments things because I like them. You [long pause] learn to do that." Thus, pleasers who had learned to be chameleon-like in their gift-selection behavior often categorized recipients as easy to please because they were familiar with the tastes of a recipient, and not because recipients' tastes mirrored their own.

Our informants used a wide range of gift-selection strategies in their attempt to express the role of pleaser. However, different strategies were used, depending upon whether pleasers found their role easy or difficult to fulfill.

Strategies Used by Pleasers for Easy Recipients

Three strategies emerged when our informants selected gifts for easy-to-please recipients. The most prevalent strategy was "Buy what they want." Laura's approach to selecting gifts for her daughter Kathy typified the use of this strategy. Over the course of interacting with Laura, she selected numerous items that Kathy had specifically mentioned, from a Minnie Mouse watch to a set of cross-country skis that Kathy had requested from a mall Santa. Thus, everything Laura selected was designed expressly to fulfill Kathy's direct requests or perceived tastes.

Other givers also used the strategy of "Buy what they want," but often did not ask recipients directly for gift ideas. We interpret this finding to mean that pleasers often made selecting desired gifts a game. Andrew notes, "I try to find out what the person would like for Christmas. I try to observe the person to see if there is something that they do need that they'd enjoy having. . . . I spend a lot of time . . . sneaking around trying to find out—bringing up a conversation about certain stuff—to see what the reaction from it would be." Thus, givers who employed "Buy what they want" took pains to ensure that a gift was desired, either by directly inquiring what the recipient wanted or by employing indirect sleuthing.
Pleasers also often employed the strategy of “Make gifts” for easy recipients, but only when they knew these gifts were truly desired. Betsy described making a gift for her son: “He’s already getting the best gift from his perspective that he’ll ever get. It’s his Christmas stocking . . . [It’s] all crewel work and I never got it finished . . . He’s watching me work on it and he’s so thrilled. . . . I never realized it would mean so much to someone. He comes in every day after school and says, ‘Let me see what you’ve done, Mommy.’”

Thus, pleasers’ homemade gifts “allow the giver and recipient to celebrate the values of friendship [or love] and singularizing labor” (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 18). The homemade gift becomes laden with sacred meaning, and this type of gift allows givers to truly give of themselves.

The third strategy used for easy-to-please recipients—“Treasure-hunt”—was also imbued with personal effort. When informants used this strategy, they deliberately embarked on journeys to nontraditional retail outlets, searching for gifts that would have meaning only for a particular recipient. On one such trip, Cindy took great pains to select a set of cookbooks at a used book store for her friend who liked to cook. Karen, however, was our quintessential treasure hunter: “It’s not like going out and buying a crock pot and figuring out who to give it to . . . I look around in the antique stores and dig around and go to flea markets. . . . My fiance, his birthday came up, and I knew that his father had been in World War II, had been with the Black Warriors, so in an antique store I saw this 1940 Life magazine and . . . it’s got Black Warriors on the front. [It] would mean nothing to the average person, but I was like, this is a treasure.” We interpret the use of “Treasure-hunt” by pleasers to mean that, for some givers, the selection of an item from a unique retail outlet “impart[s] an implicit in “Treasure hunt” resembles what Da Matta (1984, p. 216; quoted in Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993) describes as “ritual travel,” whereby the process of selecting a gift “becomes the ritualized element and, for this reason, is raised to consciousness.” In other words, “Treasure hunt” affords pleasers with another way to sacralize the gift, as they embark upon quests for items that will have true meaning only to the recipient for whom it is selected.

Strategies Used by Pleasers for Difficult Recipients

Unfortunately, pleasers sometimes faced obstacles in their attempt to express this role through gift exchange. Indeed, some informants vividly and ruefully recalled times when their attempts to express this role had been thwarted. Karen provides one such example: “One year my ex-husband and I, we made something for my Mom in the studio. Between the two of us, we thought it was great. And as soon as we saw the look on my Mom’s face, we knew that she didn’t get it. It was a sculpture. She just didn’t get it. We should have thought ahead of time, in terms of how she’d decorated her environment.”

Pleasers also used three strategies when selecting gifts for difficult recipients. One of the most common is one we have termed “Latch on.” This name is derived from the fact that pleasers typically conceived of a gift idea early in the Christmas season and rarely relinquished this gift idea, even when obstacles to selecting that particular gift arose. That the “Latch on” strategy was intended to result in a pleasing gift is reinforced by the fact that it was accompanied by extensive information search. Informants often consulted ads, catalogs, and various stores in their quest for the ideal, or at least acceptable, representation of this gift idea.

The form of the “Latch on” strategy specifically used by pleasers selecting items for difficult recipients was “Latch on/similar gift.” Namely, givers bought items similar to those they had purchased previously for recipients. We interpret the popularity of this strategy as stemming from the fact that givers used cues from past successful gift exchanges to determine whether a particular gift would help them fulfill the role of pleaser.

For example, Liz described her 87-year-old aunt as difficult to please, even though the umbrella Liz had given her last year had been a welcome addition to her aunt’s “frog collection.” This year, Liz looked at a stuffed frog, a frog perfume cachet, a frog whistle, a frog Christmas ornament, frog stickers, and frog jewelry before buying the stickers and a frog pin. Thus, pleasers using “Latch on/similar gift” do not actually duplicate a previous present, but rather offer variations on past gifts that have proved satisfactory.

Indeed, because givers are eager to please these difficult recipients, the use of a labor-intensive strategy such as “Latch on” indicates that givers are concerned that selecting a bad gift could harm the relationship. Thus, for givers, the relationships where they wish to enact the role of pleaser—but are unsure how to do so—may be the most vulnerable of all.

While pleasers who used “Latch on” did not provide actual duplicates of previous gifts, those employing “Buy same as last year” typically did offer recipients items virtually identical to those they had given in the past. Furthermore, “Buy same as last year” typically involved little or no deliberate information search. We believe our informants used this strategy because, while these givers sincerely wished to please recipients, they were aware of only one type of gift that could do so. For example, Patty wanted to please her father. However, because he had no interests “except sleeping,” she
typically gave him “popcorn! Tins of popcorn! ’Cause I know he’ll eat that! If it’s not food, I don’t know that he will like it.”

As previously mentioned, one paradox that we discovered was that our youngest, unmarried informants seemed to express the role of pleaser while still attempting to select a gift that also pleased themselves. When faced with a difficult-to-please recipient (e.g., one who did not share their tastes), these givers tended to employ a third strategy, “Buy what I like.” For instance, Hannah said she had no idea what to get her father for Christmas. During the first shopping trip, she showed tremendous interest in tiny glass ornaments, often kneeling down at displays and telling the researcher exactly which ornaments she owned. On the last trip, Hannah told the researcher she was going to buy similar ornaments for her father. Likewise, while Kate balked at buying her boyfriend the wrenches he wanted, she did buy him a magazine that she thought was cute and an ornament in a series that “they” were collecting (although she had purchased all of them).

Thus, pleasers typically employed different strategies for difficult recipients than when selecting gifts for those whom they described as easy to please. As will be seen, similar discrepancies emerged when givers expressed other roles through gift exchange.

THE PROVIDER

Our interpretation of the text revealed that, often, informants bought items that they believed were needed—but not necessarily desired—by recipients. Typically, these items were utilitarian, such as the socks and T-shirts Laura bought her husband every year. Such items were typically bought by women for their significant others and by mothers (or maternal figures) for children. The emergence of this “provider” role may therefore be due in part to a culturally bound belief that gifts should somehow be practical.

By selecting these items, our informants used gift exchange to express the role of the nurturant provider to people with whom they shared intimate relationships. The message that providers convey is simply “I want to take care of your needs.”

Because of the intimate nature of these relationships, informants often expressed the roles of both pleaser and provider to the same recipients. For example, Andrew mentioned that he tried to buy people on his gift list “something real nice and then something . . . like buying a kid a toy. You know, something they need and something that they don’t need.” This tendency reveals another dimension of the giver as chameleon, that is, that givers are so adept at adapting their role portrayal, they can express different roles to the same recipient.

Providers typically used two gift selection strategies, either alone or in combination. The first of these was “Buy throughout the year.” This strategy entailed informants’ selection of gifts beyond the scope of the traditional Christmas shopping season. Providers then typically delegated a closet in the home as the “gift closet,” a phenomenon also observed by Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1992). Betsy typified the use of this strategy: “I’ve bought them so much already. Like underwear and socks that I’ve bought since last Christmas—you know, when I catch them on sale. And I put them up in a closet. And I buy all year long—’cause if I didn’t I wouldn’t be able to afford to take care of everybody. . . . I usually buy all those kinda basic things: T-shirts, socks, underwear—those are all part of Christmas. . . . But it’s like I’ve been buying all year for them and putting it back.”

Our interpretation of the prevalence of the gift closet among providers is that the acts of accumulating and storing gifts in a particular place reassure them that they will be able to express the role of provider at Christmas. The gift closet becomes a symbol of their ability to act as nurturer and, in Betsy’s words, to “take care of everybody.”

The second strategy used by providers was “Buy many gifts.” While some of these gifts may also be intended to express the role of pleaser, our ethic interpretation is that, again, providing many gifts allows givers to truly feel they have “taken care of” recipients. Laura indicated that she always wanted her daughter to have “at least ten presents . . . because ten’s a lot.” Later, her intent to express the role of provider to her family at Christmas became clear: “We’re always going to have a good Christmas. If I have to go out and get another job . . . because as a kid I can remember us not having a lot, but we always had a good Christmas.”

Interestingly, all of the recipients for whom the “Buy throughout the year” or “Buy many gifts” strategies were used were described as easy by our informants. However, it was also apparent that there were times when givers wished to play the role of provider, but were not “allowed to” by the recipient. Specifically, many of our informants complained that some recipients on their gift list simply had no needs. One type of recipient described as such was the retired or elderly close relative. For example, Rhonda mentioned that, in the past, she had always bought her mother clothes she needed to wear to work. On a shopping trip, she commented to one of us that her mother was retiring soon, so clothes would not be a good idea. Another problem for providers was the infirm recipient, whose only true need—restored health—was beyond the giver’s ability to provide. Thus, our informants’ description of some recipients as having no needs can be more accurately interpreted as meaning that the needs these recipients did have were not needs givers could fulfill.

In summary, the act of giving to a recipient with no tangible needs typifies what Cheal (1988) describes as the tendency of some gifts in modern society to be “re-
dundant,” or offering “no advantage to the recipients and add[ing] nothing to their well-being” (p. 13). In their wish to express the role of providers, our informants were concerned that a redundant gift would not convey the message that they wished to take care of the recipient.

Providers who were “blocked” from nurturing typically did not seek an alternative gift selection strategy in order to fulfill this role. Rather, such blockage often discouraged them from acting as a provider toward a particular recipient. As Anne noted about her mother-in-law-to-be, “She doesn’t do a lot during the day. . . . And what she does, she’ll like sit on her bed and play cards all day. I, you know, have found so many things that could get her to do something and they don’t work. It’s like, I’ve just given up on that.”

This finding may be explained by the fact that the inability to provide for a recipient may potentially compromise the self-esteem of the donor. Likewise, some givers postponed expressing the role of provider until they could do so successfully. Betsy talked about how her one-year-old daughter was hard to buy for because, at that age, “she can only use so many things.” However, on many shopping trips, Betsy discussed how she had already bought her daughter certain items and had stored them away. Thus, as soon as her daughter actually did need these items, Betsy could fulfill her role as provider.

THE COMPENSATOR

One role that emerged—that of compensator—appeared to be a hybrid of both pleaser and provider. Givers expressed this role to a variety of recipients, including parents, spouses or significant others, siblings, and friends. The common reason why this role was expressed was that, through a gift, the giver attempted to make reparations for a loss that the recipient had experienced. The main message behind the gift was “I want to make it up to you.” However, the recipient’s loss typically was not one caused by the giver; as such, the purpose of the gift was one of consolation rather than of apology.

Our interpretation is that the types of losses recognized as salient seemed to be connected to the giver’s stage in life. For example, the tendency among our younger, unmarried informants was to “Buy fun gifts” for recipients, even when such gifts were not requested. While toys are obvious choices for children, we believe the reason why so many informants in their early twenties gave these gifts was that they were trying to compensate for the recipient’s “loss” of the childhood Christmas, or the time when Christmas was specifically for them and was full of innocence, delight, and wonder.

In contrast, the older informants in our sample tended to express the role of compensator to recipients who had lost either family members or precious material goods. While Wolfinbarger (1990) noted the tendency of married couples to act as compensators, we discovered that children sometimes attempted to compensate their parents as well. Laura said of her widowed father, “Because my mom passed away a few years ago . . . I buy him, you know, new T-shirts and wash rags and things he doesn’t go out and buy. So I buy those things a little at a time. . . . I always like to make sure that Dad’s got—I always like for him to have plenty to open too, so he doesn’t feel left out.”

When recipients allowed givers to occupy the role of compensator, whether these recipients were aware they were doing so or not, givers labeled these recipients “easy.” Furthermore, because the compensator is a hybrid role, this role was often fulfilled by using gift-selection strategies more typically used by pleasers and providers. For example, Anne used “Buy many gifts” and “Buy what they want” when selecting gifts for her boyfriend, who had been divorced twice and “practically, in a sense, [had] lost everything he ever had.”

Betsy employed “Make gifts” to compensate a cousin for her temporary loss of family in a transfer to Iceland: “And she’s over there without them, so what we’re going to do is . . . my cousin’s daughter and son and their friends are all going to come over and we’re going to have a big turkey dinner with china and candlelight and a fire in the woodstove and the Christmas tree. . . . And we’re gonna film all this for her and then we’ll sit by the Christmas tree and sing Christmas carols.” Thus, compensators adopted the strategies used more commonly to express the pleaser or provider role when expressing a role that shared characteristics of both.

As might be expected, even though some givers wanted to play the role of compensator, certain recipients did not always enable them to do so. In fact, it is this lack of “permission” to occupy the role of compensator that caused our informants difficulty, and not their inability to think of compensatory gifts.

One of the best examples of a blocked compensator was Patty. Early in the Christmas season, Patty described an ad for a Lionel train set. Her husband had always regretted selling a similar set that he had inherited. She began exploring the retail outlets that carried these sets, comparing prices and locating authorized dealers. Thus, Patty employed the strategy of “Latch on/new gift” for her husband.

Unfortunately for Patty, her husband had made it clear that she was to spend a limited amount on his Christmas gift. She expressed her frustration over this situation: “I want to get him something nice, and he doesn’t want me to spend any money on him. . . . I wanted to get him the train set, but I’m afraid that he’ll think it was too much money. . . . I told him I wanted to get something for him that was a lot of money and he said ‘Don’t get me anything—don’t get me anything.’ I said, ‘I’ll go get it and if you want to hurt my feelings
and break my heart and return it, then go ahead.’ He just laughed.” Eventually, Patty made a deal with her husband that would enable her to spend more on his gift. Thus, she also used the strategy of “Negotiate with the recipient.” While not a gift-selection strategy per se, such negotiation was absolutely vital in order for Patty to be able to express the role of compensator to her husband.

In sum, the role of compensator represents part pleaser and part provider. This role is expressed relatively infrequently and emerges only when the giver wishes to help the recipient offset a loss.

THE SOCIALIZER

McCracken (1986) states that “gift exchange allows individuals to insinuate certain symbolic properties into the lives of the gift recipient and to initiate possible meaning transfer” (p. 78). Nowhere is this statement more evident than when givers deliberately choose items to serve as socialization agents (Belk 1979). When givers act as socializers, the message of a gift is simply “Here are some values or knowledge that I wish you to possess.”

When our informants expressed this role, they used only one gift selection strategy—“Buy what I want them to have.” In using this strategy, the giver may not be at all concerned with pleasing the recipient but is concerned that a specific gift becomes an instrument of learning.

Givers who expressed this role were often mothers giving to children. However, Karen’s account of how she traditionally bought books for her sister, whom she described as an easy recipient, also typifies the socializer at work:

Karen. Every year, well, ever since she’s been tiny, for Christmas or her birthday, I’ll get her a fun gift, and then there will also be a book. When she was real little, it was illustrated Alice In Wonderland. When she was 13, she got Our Bodies, Ourselves . . . you know, just something that seems age-appropriate. And now it’s time for her to read this feminist manifesto [referring to The Second Sex] . . . .

Interviewer. OK. Now do you think this is something you are schooling her with, or does she talk about these books she wants?

Karen. No, I think it’s probably older sister playing like maternalistic “Here is something I’m going to influence you with.”

The above example also illustrates how Karen typically expressed two roles in selecting gifts for her sister, the first as pleaser through her selection of a “fun” gift and the second as socializer with a book that she felt her sister was “ready for.” This description highlights a finding we noted throughout the text—namely, that when our informants expressed more than one role to easy recipients, they typically chose separate gifts to express each role. We interpret this finding to indicate that givers may find it too difficult to select a gift that could express more than one role simultaneously. Put another way, our givers as chameleons seem to follow a heuristic of “One gift, one role.”

It is interesting that givers expressing the role of socializer to particular recipients never described these recipients as difficult. We explain this finding by noting that the desire to socialize a recipient stems from an internal impulse of the giver. Because the recipient may not even be aware of the giver’s intention to act as socializer, there is little chance that the recipient can thwart the giver’s attempt to occupy this role.

THE ACKNOWLEDGER

While socializers typically had an easy time selecting gifts for recipients, this was not the case with acknowledgers. When enacting this role, givers typically were engaged in obligatory gift selection for recipients who were either on the fringes of their social networks (e.g., affinal relatives or acquaintances) or were closer relatives with whom givers were experiencing tension. Hence, it is not surprising that givers described more recipients as difficult when expressing this role than when expressing all of the other roles combined.

Because of the nature of their social networks, acknowledgers must extend something to these recipients, in order to say, “I recognize that some relationship exists between us, and here is a token of that relationship.” Jane summed up this feeling when explaining why she selected gifts for her child’s teacher: “One reason is because everyone else does. That’s not a good reason but it’s one of the main reasons. But I guess it’s just to show you appreciate them being good to your kids.”

Indeed, because acknowledgers’ gifts are typically obligatory, these offerings may not resemble gifts at all, but more closely resemble token offerings. As such, these gifts may actually be extended to mutually commemorate the existence of relatively superficial social ties between giver and recipient. Contrary to Cheal’s (1987, 1988) positive depiction of gifts as agents of social cohesion, some gifts in modern society may simply resemble items of “pure trade” (Malinowski 1922), wherein reciprocation of an obligatory token is socially mandated.

Moreover, the high level of mobility in American culture—as well as the transitory nature of relationships with people such as teachers—means that the list of recipients whom one must acknowledge can vary from year to year. Thus, acknowledgers may have little opportunity to accumulate gift-exchange experiences with affinal relatives or acquaintances, or to even learn how a gift was received. Even token offerings typically require some knowledge of the recipient, at least in order to avoid selecting an offensive gift. Kate’s experience supports this assumption:
On our way out we spied some pig cookie jars and diet plan pigs. The diet plan pig is something you put in the fridge and it oinks when you open the fridge door. . . . We thought they were quite a hoot. She [Kate] mentioned that she thought her boyfriend’s mother might like that, but then again, she might also be offended if Kate gave it to her. [Field notes]

When interpreting acknowledgers’ gift-selection strategies, our first observation was that they could be divided into three categories: (1) those used when acknowledgers selected gifts by themselves, (2) those used when acknowledgers selected gifts with others, and (3) those used when acknowledgers selected gifts for close relatives with whom they were experiencing conflict.

Strategies Used by Acknowledgers When Selecting Gifts by Themselves

When selecting gifts by themselves, acknowledgers used one or more of four strategies designed to help them capitalize on whatever limited knowledge they possessed about the recipient’s identity. For example, Karen used “Buy on impulse” (see Rook 1987) when shopping for her sister and brother-in-law:

Karen sat down on a bench, seeming a little frustrated. She started talking about what she was going to get her sister and brother-in-law. She said that the only thing she knew her brother-in-law liked was boxing. . . . I asked her how much she wanted to spend on them. She said it would be about $20–25. I mentioned in passing that we had watched “Rocky” the night before. She kind of perked up and asked me how much movies cost. I told her sometimes as low as $10. She asked me, “Is there a movie place in the mall?” I told her that MusicLand carried them. We walked into the store and Karen made a beeline for the videos.

She was over in the movie section, and she knelt down. She picked up a video of the new “The Wall” concert that was played when the wall came down in East Berlin. She said, “Do you see a price on this?” I turned it over. It was $19.95. She stood up and said, “That’s it . . . Pink Floyd is one common interest I know they have.” [Field notes]

A second strategy used by acknowledgers was “Buy relationship-affirming gifts.” With this strategy, the cue used to aid in gift selection is the actual specific relationship between giver and recipient. Thus, these gifts represent “tie-signs” (Goffman 1971)—or transactions that “contain evidence about the nature of the relationship between donor and recipient” (Cheal 1988, p. 22)—in the most literal sense. Betsy’s attempt to use this strategy was thwarted when she tried to select a gift for her grandfather-in-law:

She’d already finished her grandmother-in-law’s gifts and didn’t know what to get him. She thought maybe a nice coffee mug. . . . We looked at all of them, but there weren’t any for grandpas. Just grandmas, moms, and dads (and sisters, daughters, etc). Everything but grandpas. She seemed quite frustrated, because she thought it would be easier to find. [Field notes]

Acknowledgers also used “Make gifts” for recipients. While this strategy was also used by pleasers and compensators, we interpreted acknowledgers’ motivations for creating gifts to be completely different. Simply put, pleasers and compensators were intent on the fact that the gift being made was actually desired by the recipient. In contrast, many acknowledgers mentioned that they used this strategy purely “out of desperation.” That acknowledgers typically made food for recipients supports the statement made by Sherry et al. (1993) that “for nonsignificant others, good gifts probably should be consumable or intangible; they disappear rather than linger in the recipient’s life.”

We further interpret acknowledgers’ use of “Make gifts” to mean that, because they had acquired so few cues from recipients as to what type of gift might be acceptable, they perceived that there was nothing in the marketplace to help them express this role. However, a homemade gift also contains the intangible elements of time and effort. Therefore, acknowledgers made gifts not so much to please teachers, neighbors, and co-workers but because, even if such gifts were not desired, they would be harder to reject.

The fourth and final strategy used by acknowledgers when selecting gifts by themselves was that of “Buy for joint recipients,” or selecting one gift that could be simultaneously presented to more than one person on their gift lists. Typically, recipients were paired when at least one of them was relatively unfamiliar to the giver. We interpret the popularity of this strategy to stem from the fact that buying a joint gift could reduce both the physical and psychological commitment required by acknowledgers when selecting gifts for affinal relatives or acquaintances. For example, Karen used this strategy in conjunction with “Buy on impulse” when selecting the Pink Floyd video for her sister and brother-in-law. Ironically, Karen’s use of “Buy for joint recipients” may have caused both recipients to be labeled “difficult,” when in fact only her brother-in-law was truly a stranger to her.

Strategies Used by Acknowledgers When Selecting Gifts with Others

As previously mentioned, acknowledgers often enlisted the help of others when selecting gifts and employed two strategies when doing so. This process seemed to occur only when acknowledgers truly were at a loss over what to select for recipients. Furthermore, we interpret acknowledgers’ use of such strategies as their attempt to reduce the risk associated with selecting a potentially bad gift. Some researchers (see Heeler et al. 1979; Mattson 1982) have noted that gift exchange is often accompanied by higher perceived social risk.
than the selection of items for oneself. Thus, it is not surprising that acknowledgers who were “stumped” often sought out someone who could possibly help them lower the risk incurred when selecting gifts for unfamiliar recipients.

With the strategy of “Buy with someone,” the acknowledger tended to remain somewhat involved in gift selection. Rebecca used this strategy, stating that, when selecting gifts, “Me and Edward [her son] . . . it’s a family thing.” On one shopping trip, Edward enabled his mother to fulfill her role as acknowledger:

At Children’s Palace, Edward . . . took charge. He knew exactly what he wanted and thus made his mom’s shopping easier. She bought two small Lego cars for [Edward’s cousin] under $10, which could fit into the Lego town system her nephew already has. [Field notes]

Moreover, some acknowledgers also enlisted help in gift selection while completely withdrawing from the process themselves. Informants often found ingenious ways to “Pawn off” obligatory gift selection tasks. For instance, Lana said that her husband “could figure out” what to get his brothers and uncles. Likewise, Jane asked her children to decide what to give to their grandparents and teachers. Givers delegated either the task of thinking of a gift idea or the entire gift-search and gift-purchase process. The infrequent use of this strategy was probably due to the primarily female composition of the sample. Because women are apparently socialized in American culture to nurture and maintain familial and social bonds, it is not surprising that this strategy occurred relatively infrequently among our female sample. Indeed, the literature supports our assumption that “Pawn off” would have been a much more prevalent strategy had the sample been composed of men.

Strategies Used When Acknowledging Strained Relationships

Most of the recipients for whom the above strategies were used were either affinal relatives or acquaintances. Because of this fact, the valences attached to these relationships were typically neutral to positive. However, acknowledgers also enacted this role with more closely related family members. Yet this was the case only when the relationships between acknowledgers and these recipients were so strained that the level of intimacy typically characterizing these relationships was diminished.

Because of social norms, our informants apparently felt unable to eliminate these recipients entirely from their Christmas list. Nor were they permitted to vent their frustration about being “forced” to select such a gift. Faced with such a situation, acknowledgers apparently experienced “psychological reactance,” or the perception that their ability to act as they truly desired was impaired (Brehm 1966; Clee and Wicklund 1980; Poe 1977).

Having no other recourse, acknowledgers vented their frustration over their loss of freedom, and their obligation to select a gift for such a relative, while actually engaged in gift selection. This interpretation supports Goodwin et al.’s (1990) statement that psychological reactance may “explain differences in search and price preferences” for gifts (p. 696).

Acknowledgers engaged in strained relationships with close relatives typically employed one of two gift selection strategies. The first of these resembles what has been described as “lateral cycling” (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry et al. 1992). Typically, this process entails passing on a previously owned item. Because the items passed on by our informants were used, they resembled “discounted hand-me-downs . . . tak[ing] on an implied degradation” (Sherry et al. 1992, p. 59).

In our study, Liz revealed that she and her father did not get along: “My dad said before, ‘You aren’t getting money for Christmas, that’s not a Christmas present.’ But I needed the money for [my] trip.” In the second interview, the following interchange took place:

Interviewer. What’d you get your dad?
Liz. Oh, I gave him this green shirt.
Interviewer. Oh, OK, because you didn’t have that before.
Liz. (laughs) Well, actually I did have it . . . I was a tree at Halloween and I bought this shirt . . . and I bought an Extra Large.

Likewise, Betsy reported that she was going to give her husband’s “old and mean” grandmother a scarf that she herself owned, but that her husband disliked.

Thus, the strategy “Use lateral cycling,” enabled acknowledgers to offer recipients something less than a gift, bypassing “one phase of the sacralizing process . . . [during which] consumers take objects from the profane world where they are purchased, systematically remove price markers, and decoratively wrap them” (Belk et al. 1989, p. 17).

The second strategy used by acknowledgers engaged in tense relationships was to “Settle” for a gift that met the giver’s minimal requirements. With this strategy, givers consciously or unconsciously budgeted the amount of time, effort, and/or money they were willing to expend on a gift for these recipients. Anne explained her relationship with her grandmother: “I begged from [her] and she sent me a lot of money and I paid off one of my loans. OK . . . that’s one of the reasons we don’t get along . . . She’s given my brother and my two sisters [large sums of money]: ‘You don’t have to pay it back . . . ’ The deal with my dear old grandma is I have to sell my car to pay her back. That kind of irritates me.” Anne decided to get her grandmother a lap blanket for Christmas, and the shopping trip proceeded as follows:

After a few minutes of wandering, Anne said that she needed to find domestics because that’s where it would
be... She looked at the various designs they had. They had some large ones which were more than she wanted to pay... Then she found a smaller lap blanket which was the price she wanted to pay. She mentioned that would be “good enough.” [Field notes]

It is interesting that the conflicts described above by Liz and Anne both involved intergenerational struggles over money. This finding may imply that these givers did not feel they had benefited from the downward flow of resources that typically characterizes modern intergenerational gift exchange. Because they felt they were victims of “unbalanced” gift-exchange relationships (Belk 1976; Caplow 1982), they resisted spending the time and effort necessary to select a gift that would actually please the recipient.

Obviously, a wide range of strategies was used by acknowledgers. Our explanation for this finding is that, by definition, acknowledgers either had relatively insubstantial or tumultuous relationships with recipients. Even the most adept givers-as-chameleons found it difficult to adapt their gift selection strategies when acknowledging recipients. Our informants developed a barrage of strategies to help them engage in successful acknowledgement. Moreover, they described more recipients as difficult than easy. We explain this finding by noting that our informants’ gift lists contained a large number of affinal relatives and acquaintances. Furthermore, conflict with a few close relatives contributed to the number of difficult recipients.

**THE AVOIDER**

By definition, the avoider role is expressed through the absence of any actual gift exchange. However, we discuss it here because, through their lack of gift giving, avoiders send recipients deliberate messages. These messages range from the relatively benign “I do not wish to enter into a gift-exchange relationship with you” to the more direct “You are not worthy of being acknowledged at this time.” Nancy’s discussion of how she “avoids” her nieces and nephews illustrates the first message:

*Nancy.* I don’t have a large family and also I never started [giving to] my nieces and nephews that I do have. I never started because once you start you can’t break out of that mode. Like they’ll be expecting each and every time.

*Interviewer.* OK. That’s interesting. Has that ever... do you think, caused any friction between your family?

*Nancy.* I’m the “aunt that doesn’t give...” Just as simple as that... One of my good friends told me, he said don’t ever start it, it was just like these kids are half-way grown and they’re still asking for gifts. And I think that’s hard.

In contrast, Anne’s message when expressing the role of avoider was clearly punitive. She remarked, “I’m not happy with my sister right now. She ain’t getting shit.” And while she had discussed possible gift options for her father early in the shopping season, by the second interview she remarked that he “wasn’t getting anything. He has since been a bad boy and been crossed off my Christmas list.”

Thus, avoiders send a clear message by their total refusal to employ any gift selection strategies or to express any social role to recipients.

**SUMMARY**

Our interpretation reveals that our informants typically used different gift-selection strategies, depending on whether they perceived recipients as helping or hindering their ability to act as chameleons, and adapted their gift-giving behavior in order to express a particular social role to these recipients.

Table 2 summarizes the roles discussed above, as well as the gift selection strategies used when givers attempted to express these roles. What is striking about this table is the virtual lack of overlap of gift-selection strategies across roles. For example, only “Make gifts” and “Latch on” were used when givers perceived recip-

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategies used for easy recipients</th>
<th>Strategies used for difficult recipients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pleaser</td>
<td>Buy what they want (direct inquiries), Buy what they want (sleuthing), Treasure-hunt</td>
<td>Latch on/similar gift, Buy same as last year, Buy what I like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Buy throughout the year, Buy many gifts</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensator</td>
<td>Buy fun gifts, Buy multiple gifts, Make gifts</td>
<td>Latch on/new gift, Negotiate with the recipient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializer</td>
<td>Buy what I want them to have</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledger</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Buy on impulse, Buy relationship-affirming gifts, Make gifts, Buy for joint recipients, Buy with someone, Pawn off, Use lateral cycling, Settle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoider</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—While not a strategy per se, “Negotiate with the recipient” was used to enable the compensator to express that particular social role.
iments as either easy or difficult. However, as previously discussed, the motives for using these strategies were also different across roles.

This table also reinforces a previously mentioned paradox—namely, that the widest variety of gift-selection strategies emerged for difficult recipients with whom givers’ relationships were typically superficial. This finding supports the statement that “gift giving frequently becomes a contest, even an ordeal” (Sherry et al. 1993).

**IMPLICATIONS**

The above interpretations raise several issues that are worthy of further research. Four are discussed below.

Expanding Our Understanding of Social Roles

The giver is not the only party to express a social role during gift exchange. As Turner (1962) notes, “A role cannot exist without one or more relevant other-roles toward which it is oriented” (p. 23). While this study has focused on the roles expressed by givers, an important extension would be to examine which roles recipients express when engaged in gift exchange. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to determine to what extent both parties are cognizant of their expression of social roles during such exchange. Thus, an extension of this research could involve the study of giver-recipient dyads—or perhaps even entire social networks engaged in gift exchange—and the examination of how the social roles expressed by both givers and recipients influence both gift selection and gift receipt.

Another interesting extension of this research would be to examine changes in the social roles expressed by givers and recipients over time. As Turner (1962, p. 23) notes, “Interaction is always a tentative process, a process of continuously testing the conception one has of the role of the other. . . . The product of the testing process is the stabilization or the modification of one’s own role.” Because social relationships are dynamic, it seems logical to assume that the roles expressed by givers and recipients may change over time. What is important to understand is the conditions that cause the roles of either party to remain consistent or be modified. Longitudinal studies of giver-recipient dyads or networks would be beneficial, in order to expand our understanding of the fluid nature of social roles expressed through gift exchange over time.

Finally, we did not fully explore the issue of how the social roles expressed by givers and recipients within the context of gift exchange relate to the roles expressed outside the gift-exchange situation. Understanding this issue is important, because the roles expressed through gift exchange could either mirror the existing relationship between giver and recipient or be totally unreflec-

tive of the actual giver-recipient relationship. For example, many acknowledgers appear to express no role at all to recipients outside the gift-exchange situation. The relationship between the roles expressed via gift exchange and those expressed on a day-to-day basis between giver and recipient is a topic worthy of further exploration.

**Examining Gift Exchange across the Life Cycle**

After being heralded as a model that could shed light on issues pertaining to consumer decision making (Jain 1975; Murphy and Staples 1979; Wells and Gubar 1966), the concept of the “family life cycle” appears to have fallen a bit out of favor among consumer researchers. However, Otnes and Woodruff (1991) argue that the giver’s stage in the life cycle could explain variations in gift-selection behavior. While our own sample of informants was relatively homogenous, we did find preliminary evidence for this supposition. For example, our informants whom Murphy and Staples (1979) would have classified as “young singles” typically did not have a wide range of affinal relatives and acquaintances on their gift lists. These givers apparently were not experienced at gift selection for a wide variety of recipients and hence did not adapt their gift-selection strategies to express a variety of social roles. As a result, they typically bought gifts that they themselves would have enjoyed.

Our research offers preliminary evidence that, for those informants who were married and had children, the list of potential gift recipients had become much more heterogenous. Furthermore, because many of these “new” recipients had become members of the giver’s family, the consequences of selecting a failed gift were serious. Thus, these givers had become more chameleonic in their gift-selection behavior as they were forced to express social roles to recipients who had not previously been a part of their lives.

The influence of the recipient’s stage in the life cycle on gift exchange should also be explored. For example, we observed that certain recipients’ stages in the life cycle made the giver’s expression of a desired role difficult. One need only recall Betsy’s frustration that her one-year-old daughter did not need anything, and Bet- sy’s tendency to buy things and store them until she could act as provider to her daughter. Likewise, our informants often seemed perplexed by the problem of selecting gifts for elderly or infirm recipients, who had moved into the latter stages of the life cycle. Further study could apply both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore how gift-selection strategies—and the social roles expressed through these strategies—vary with both the giver’s and recipient’s stages in the life cycle.
Gift Givers as Chameleons

The metaphor of the chameleon seems particularly applicable to givers engaged in exchange behavior at Christmas. For example, our informants expressed many social roles to recipients through exchange and adapted their gift-selection strategies to reflect that fact. Future research could examine the following issues: (1) whether givers and recipients are themselves aware of the chameleonic nature of the giver, (2) what other exchange occasions (if any) feature givers-as-chameleons, and (3) what other social roles givers may express, besides those that we discussed.

One other aspect of role acquisition that deserves further attention is the notion of how givers “learn” to become chameleons. Specifically, it is worth exploring what types of information they actually gather, store, and employ as they attempt to learn how to fulfill different roles and learn to evaluate whether particular gifts are appropriate symbols of these roles. Once again, longitudinal research would be helpful in this regard.

Gift-giving Research: Breaking the Gender Boundary

The fact that our sample was composed almost solely of women, coupled with our observation that most gift-exchange research has examined women’s gift-giving behavior, should in no way imply that men’s gift-giving behavior should be ignored. Indeed, men do buy gifts, albeit perhaps not as often as women. An extension of this study could examine what social roles men seek to express when they select gifts.

Furthermore, if it is true that men avoid gift-selection and exchange on some occasions, one question worth examining is why this is the case. For example, are men “freeloaders” who simply want to avoid the daunting tasks of shopping and giving? Or are they “opportunist” who wish to take credit for well-received gifts that were selected by their partners, and likewise wish to delegate the blame for any failed gifts? In terms of involvement in the gift-exchange process, what purposes do men believe are served by gift exchange, and how do these purposes differ from those reported by women? By exploring male gift-giving behavior, a valuable contribution would be made to the area of gift-exchange research as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This article builds on Sherry et al.’s (1993) statement that gift exchange “may be one of the few remaining crucial incidents of true significance or sufficient periodicity that test the social ties that consumers have formed in their relationships with others.” Specifically, this study contributes the following to the field of gift-exchange research: First, it isolates the emergent tendency of our informants’ to describe certain recipients as difficult or easy in terms of gift selection. Exploring the issue of difficult recipients also contributes to a stream of research that focuses upon the “dark side” of the gift-exchange process (Ottes, Kim, and Lowrey 1992; Rucker, Huidor, and Prato 1991; Rucker et al. 1991; Sherry et al. 1992, 1993). Second, this study employs the metaphor of the gift giver as chameleon to describe how consumers move fluidly in their expression of one or more social roles to recipients with whom they share varied relationships. Third, it attributes givers’ classifications of difficult and easy recipients to givers’ conscious or unconscious perceptions of recipients as a help or hindrance, as givers attempt to express specific roles through gift exchange. Fourth, it describes six roles that were expressed through gifts, thus building on previous research (e.g., Belk 1979; Wolfinbarger 1990). Most important, it interprets the use of specific gift-selection strategies to be inextricably connected to the type of social role givers are attempting to express through interaction with each recipient on their gift lists.

Our study has provided new insight into the ways in which the nature of the giver-recipient relationship may influence gift selection. We hope that this article will encourage others to pursue the study of how the nature of giver-recipient relationships—and the roles expressed within these relationships—can influence gift exchange.

APPENDIX A

Informant Descriptions

Andrew. Andrew is a white, middle-class male in his twenties. He is single but has a girlfriend. He is not close to his parents. He is self-employed. He loves the holidays, especially the parties. He has only five people on his list, but he buys lavish gifts for them.

Anne. Anne is a white, lower-middle-class female in her mid-twenties. She is single but lives with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend has two young daughters, and Anne enjoys the time the four of them share. Anne is a full-time clerical worker. She loves everything about the holidays, especially decorating. She has about 15 people on her Christmas list.

Betsy. Betsy is a white, middle-class female in her mid-thirties. She is married and has three children. She does not work outside the home. She is very clever at making gifts and tends to take on much responsibility during the holidays. She has about 25 people on her list, including many affinal relatives.

Cindy. Cindy is a white, middle-class female in her twenties. She is single. She works part-time as a temporary worker at the university. She thinks Christmas is fun, but is not very close to her parents, so the holidays can be painful. She has about 10 people on her list.
Hannah. Hannah is a white, middle-class female in her mid-twenties. She is single and lives with her mother. She works part-time. Her favorite aspect of the holidays is shopping. She has only four people on her list.

Jane. Jane is a white, middle-class female in her early thirties. She is married, with two children. Her son lives with her former husband, and she has custody of her daughter. She is a full-time engineer. She enjoys the holidays, especially shopping for her children. She has four people on her list.

Karen. Karen is a white, middle-class female in her late twenties. She has a fiancé who lives fairly far away. She works part-time in a flower shop. She likes to look for unique “treasures” for holidays gifts. She has about 15 people on her list.

Kate. Kate is a white, lower-middle-class female in her twenties. She is a former student whose family cannot afford to keep her in school. She does not have a steady job. Her parents are divorced. She loves Christmas, especially the traditions she and her mother keep alive for her younger sister. She has known her boyfriend all her life. She has seven people on her list.

Lana. Lana is a white, middle-class female in her early twenties. She is married, with two young children. She does not work outside the home. She loves everything about the holidays, particularly shopping. She has almost 30 people on her list.

Laura. Laura is a white, middle-class female in her mid-thirties. She is married and has one daughter. She works part-time as a receptionist. She enjoys shopping for gifts, especially for her daughter. She has 10 people on her list.

Liz. Liz is a white, middle-class female in her twenties. She is single, and has many friends. She works full-time for the Campus Recycling Center. She enjoys Christmas but dreads shopping as Christmas approaches. She is very creative, and makes many gifts. She has about 15 people on her list.

Nancy. Nancy is an African-American, middle-class female in her thirties. She is married and has no children. She works full-time as a social worker. She does not really celebrate Christmas, but instead celebrates the African-American holiday of Kwanza. However, she does buy her husband and her “surrogate aunt” Christmas gifts.

Patty. Patty is an Asian-American, middle-class female in her twenties. She is married and has a baby girl. She does not work outside the home. She loves everything about the holidays except for shopping. Her husband is concerned about their budget. She has about 15 people on her list.

Rebecca. Rebecca is a white, lower-middle-class female in her late thirties. She is divorced, with a teenage son; they live in low-income housing. She works full-time at the university. She does not like the crowds of Christmas shoppers, and finds the holidays somewhat lonely. However, she likes to get together with her family and cook. She has about 15 people on her list.

Rhonda. Rhonda is a white, middle-class female in her late thirties. She is married and has no children. She works full-time at the university. She feels much stress during the holidays. She does most of her husband’s and mother’s shopping for them. She has over 15 people on her list.

APPENDIX B

Methods for Ensuring Trustworthiness of Data

We were concerned with two issues relating to data quality. The first of these was the trustworthiness of our data (e.g., that we acquired honest representations of gift-selection behavior). Using procedures recommended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), we (1) combined interviews with shopping trips to provide a triangulation of methods, (2) employed overt interaction with informants, (3) assured informant anonymity when presenting results, (4) established rapport through multiple informant encounters, and (5) used recommended interviewing techniques such as probing (see Bogdan and Taylor 1984; McCracken 1988).

Our second concern was that our interpretation accurately reflect our informants’ experiences. To ensure that this was the case, we took the following measures: (1) We devoted a substantial amount of time in the second interviews to clarifying issues with informants that had arisen during previous interactions. (2) We solicited two informants who had expressed interest in our research project to read our final interpretation. They noted that our findings seemed logical and consistent with what they remembered. (3) We asked our informants to provide an honest assessment of how we might have influenced their gift selection. Most stated that our presence was not distracting; a few admitted that they typically did not start shopping so early. However, they stated the ways in which they shopped and the items that they purchased were the same as if we had not accompanied them.

[Received February 1992. Revised November 1992.]

REFERENCES


EASY AND DIFFICULT GIFT SELECTION 243


Bogdan, Robert and Steven J. Taylor (1984), Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods, New York: Wiley.


Geertz, Clifford (1973), The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic.


Mead, George Herbert (1934), Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


Rucker, Margaret, Tamara Balch, Fiona Higham, and Kimberly Schenter (1991), “Thanks but No Thanks: Rejec-
tion, Possession and Disposition of the Failed Gift,” paper presented at the Association for Consumer Research conference, Chicago, IL.


